

A Mystic Initiation : Yeats's *A Vision*

Ryuji Ishikawa

In “Introduction to *A Vision*” Yeats describes the beginning of his queer communication with the “instructors,” as he calls them, as follows :

On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. (8)

Thus this “unknown writer,” which is proved to be plural later, provides him with materials for his symbolism in the form of “scattered sentences” through his wife as a spiritualistic medium. However the “unknown writer” has another effect on the text. As A. G. Stock puts it, “*A Vision*, with its doubtful origins, its bizarre terminology, and the unfashionable drift of its philosophy, is an awkward book to swallow” (Stock 139). While, as the transcendental origin, the unknown beings provoke the poet to construct the symbolism, and function as the profound basis of the text, on the other hand, as unintelligible existences raising various questions, they are one of the major causes of awkwardness of *A Vision*.

Nevertheless, while holding such a destructive seed in its foundations, the text, as a whole, accomplishes its main purpose, that is, the representation of a unique symbolism ; even though its validity as a pseudo-philosophical or pseudo-scientific writing remains questionable. This purpose is attained by diminishing and eventually eliminating the lingering shadow of the “instructors” in the text. This essay aims to examine how the text could be constructed as the representation of a unique symbolism holding such a vague origin at its base.

I

In the first place, why the “instructors” should be introduced into the text ? It is clear that the existence of such unintelligible beings should necessarily undermine the persuasibility of the symbolism which is represented in the text. And such clumsiness actually happened as Stock’s remark, which is cited before, exemplifies. Was it impossible to present the symbolism by claiming that it is Yeats’s own ? The answer is probably “yes.” It seems that Yeats did not intend to publish the symbolism as his own creation, and that he virtually could not do it. This is partly because it is an indisputable fact that he was concerned with occult activities as he himself declares in many places. Therefore it seems inevitable that he has to refer to the inconceivable but undeniable source of the symbolism in *A Vision*.

However the main reason of introducing the “instructors” resides in another fact. It is that Yeats required a certain authority to the symbolism in *A Vision*. His demand of the authority is not explicitly maintained but it can be inferred from the existence of the poem “Phases of the Moon” (59-64) in the text.

“The Phases of the Moon” (59-64) is originally contained in the colloc-

tion *The Wild Swans at Coole* which was published in 1919 (*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 129-72). And in *A Vision*, it is put in the position that initiates the minute explanation of the symbolism. As its position in the text indicates, the poem plays an introductory role to the symbolism. Indeed, as Harold Bloom says, this poem is something like a "text for exposition," and it forms a concise and summarized representation of the symbolism (Bloom 204).

The introductory role of "The Phases of the Moon" itself is not so much concern here. What the matter is the fact that Michael Robartes, one of the protagonists in this poem, is given an authoritative status over the esoteric wisdom which can never be attained by Yeats alone. The relation of Michael Robartes to the latter, who is following the mysterious discipline of the symbolism, is described in "The Phases of the Moon" as follows :

ROBARTES

.....
 We are on the bridge; that shadow is the tower,
 And the light proves that he is reading still.
 He has found, after the manner of his kind,
 Mere images;
 An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil;
 And now he seeks in book or manuscript
 What he shall never find.

Aherne

Why should not you
 Who know it all ring at his door, and speak
 Just truth enough to show that his whole life
 Will scarcely find for him a broken crust
 Of all those truths that are your daily bread; . . .
 (lines 10, 13-6, 21-9)

Robartes's esoteric discipline, that is his "daily bread," is equivalent to the symbolism represented in *A Vision*. Therefore Robartes can be considered to have an authoritative status over the symbolism in *A Vision*.

What this poem reveals is that the symbolism, the esoteric wisdom in the poem, is not Yeats's own creation but has already existed beyond his knowledge and intellectual ability, and that there is someone else who knows, acquires and practices its discipline. The same thing can be said about the "instructors." They previously know the esoteric wisdom which Yeats tries to represent in *A Vision*. Such equivalent roles which Michael Robartes and the "instructors" play in relation to the symbolism are exemplified by the following statement of Yeats in "Introduction :"

[In the first version of *A Vision* published in 1925 (Harper i-xxiii, 1-256),] I had misinterpreted the geometry, and in my ignorance of philosophy failed to understand distinctions upon which the coherence of the whole depended, and as my wife was unwilling that her share [in automatic writing] should be known, and I to seem sole author, I had invented an unnatural story of an Arabian traveller [Michael Robartes] which I must amend and find a place for some day because I was fool enough to write half a dozen poems that are unintelligible without it.
(19)

Though there is a difference between the automatic writing as an actual event in Yeats's real life, and Michael Robartes as an explicit fictional character, the passage clearly indicates that the story of Michael Robartes has an almost equal value to the automatic writing or the existence of the "instructors" in the sense that both of them gives a meaning or authority to his "half a dozen poems" and to the symbolism at their base.

Thus it can be considered that the main reason why the "instructors" should be introduced into the text resides in the fact that Yeats needed a

certain authority to the symbolism in *A Vision*. However they are actually unintelligible beings. The word “instructors” doubtlessly exists in the text, but nothing about their attributes is given there ; to say nothing of their appearance and age, their gender, nationality, background of intelligence and even tone of voice remain unrevealed. They are only referred to as “instructors.” From this standpoint Michael Robartes as a fictional but incarnated human character is much more intelligible being than the “instructors.”

The reason why there is no mention about the attributes of the “instructors” may reside in the fact that Yeats himself did not know them. Indeed the communication between the “instructors” and Yeats was conducted through automatic writing not teaching in classroom or face-to-face conversation. Moreover what he received from them is actually fragmentary information about their esoteric wisdom which is reconstructed in *Yeats's Vision Papers : Volumes 1-3*, edited by George Mills Harper. The process of their communication is minutely recorded in the documents as follows :

Oxford

Jan 17

Thomas

1. Any special subject you wish [to] take ?
1. *Antithetical not funnell*
2. do anti in connection with spirit ?
2. No I was showing you your anti
3. Can you explain ?
3. Only the way you work it in a circle inwards instead of outwards
(Harper 1 : 264)

Their “conversation,” as reconstructed here, certainly contains the sentences which reveal the responses of the “instructors,” as unintelligible but certainly living beings, towards Yeats's statements and questions, but the

words or the sentences tell nothing about the attributes of the “instructors,” and remain indifferent fragmentary information. Possibly Yeats might perceive some of the qualities of his correspondents, but they are not recorded in the documents nor expressed in the text of *A Vision*, either.

There arises a dilemma between the necessary demand for the “instructors” as authoritative beings over the symbolism in *A Vision* and the inevitable awkwardness which they cause in the text. On the one hand, they are indispensable to *A Vision* in order to give the symbolism represented there some authenticity. On the other hand they not only make the readers uneasy about the symbolism in the text but might also deteriorate its authenticity itself which the “instructors” are expected to bring about.

II

However this dilemma which the “instructors” cause is resolved by diminishing not the authority but the existence of the “instructors” in the text and by eventually displacing them from the text. At last the symbolism in *A Vision* is presented as not the “instructors’ ” symbolism but Yeats’s own. In this section, how such strategy is conducted and finally accomplished shall be elucidated.

The word “strategy” may sound inappropriate because it implies an intensive inclination. The “strategy” which shall be discussed is rather spontaneous as a phenomenon of a writing process. Whether it is intensive or spontaneous, however, the dilemma in the existence of the “instructors” is certainly resolved by the “strategy.” Therefore the word “strategy” in the following examination should be considered to imply a quite spontaneous writing process.

Indeed, the strategy is not singular but plural. They are not apparently independent of each other ; they proceed simultaneously all the way along,

and sometimes overlap each other. For this reason, to make the points clearer, they should be divided into three aspects. The first is the reinforcement of the discourses of the "instructors" by the discourses of other people. The second is the transition of the attitude of Yeats, the protagonist "I," toward the "instructors" and their symbolism. And the last is the transition of the status of the "instructors" and their discourses.

As mentioned before, the information of the "instructors" is so fragmentary that it requires a certain unification of them. This unification can possibly be an utterly arbitrary one. But if such a unification is applied, the clumsiness of the text must be amplified rather than diminished. This is because such a unification lacks any conceivable reason why the fragmentary information must be united in such a way. Moreover, even if the unification is logical enough to maintain its internal unity, readers still cannot be sufficiently persuaded because it cannot eliminate the shadow of the "instructors." It can be "a" possible unification of their fragmentary information, not the completion of the text which successfully represents a unique symbolism with the anonymous "instructors" as its origin.

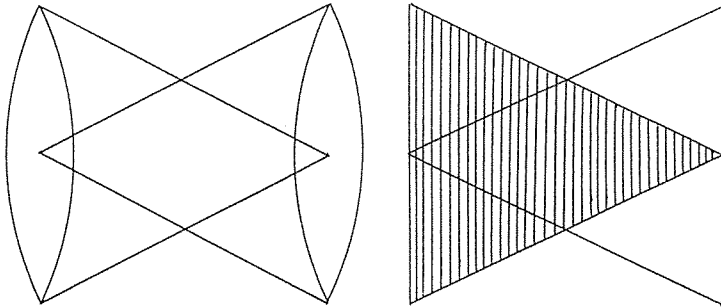
However the presence of the "instructors," that is the very word "instructors," cannot be extinguished from the text. Consequently, the discourses of other people should be introduced to support the obscure discourse of the "instructors," so that the authenticity of the unification of their information should be maintained and that, henceforth, the awkwardness which is caused by the "instructors" should be diminished.

The information of the "instructors" contains many peculiar terms which cannot be understood as their meanings in general, like the *Four Faculties*, *Will*, *Mask*, *Creative Mind*, *Body of Fate*, and so on. In addition to such terms, their symbolism retains a unique figure as its principal symbol. It is called "gyre," "vortex" or "cone." Its meanings, including its movements and the characteristics attributed to these movements, are quite

complicated and ambiguous. Therefore, in order to explicate its meanings and to make the symbol itself a definite principle for the symbolism, the symbol is examined from many aspects, that is, the discourses of other people, like philosophers and thinkers.

The section, “Part I : The Principal Symbol” in “Book I : The Great Wheel” is dedicated to the explanation of the meanings of the principal symbol. In the beginning of this section, the terms, “Discord” and “Concord,” are explicated according to Empedocles, a Greek philosopher, poet and politician. After the explanation of “Discord” and “Concord,” as eccentric and concentric natures respectively (67-8), the principal symbol of the “instructors” is described as follows :

If we think of the vortex attributed to Discord as formed by circles diminishing until they are nothing, and of the opposing sphere attributed to Concord as forming from itself an opposing vortex, the apex of each vortex in the middle of the other’s base, we have the fundamental symbol of my instructors.



If I call the unshaded cone [one of the opposing cones] “Discord” and the other “Concord” and think of each as the bound of a gyre, I see that the gyre of “Concord” diminishes as that of “Discord” increases, and can imagine after that the gyre of “Concord” increasing while that of “Discord” diminishes, and so on, one gyre within the other always. Here the

thought of Heraclitus dominates all : "Dying each other's life, living each other's death." (68)

Thus, the principal symbol, that is the opposing cones, is not left to explain itself. In order to depict its complicated movements, the terms of Empedocles and the thought of Heraclitus are introduced into the text. These complementary explanations are not only useful in making the movements more discernible but also effective enough to show the necessity of explaining the symbol in that way because the movements of the symbol seem to retain some philosophical implications in themselves.

Moreover, the gyre images of other people are also introduced : for example, that of Thomas Aquinas, of Swedenborg, of Flaubert and of others (68-70). Of course these other gyre images also strengthen the philosophical implication of the principal symbol of the "instructors." But, at the same time, they exemplify that the gyre image is not an idiosyncratic case which is limited to the "instructors," but is common to many other philosophers and artists. Henceforth, introducing of the other gyre images implies the reinforcement of the universality of the principal symbol in philosophical thoughts.

Thus the introducing of the complementary discourses of other thinkers into the text have two effects. On the one hand, because of their ideological implication, they make it possible to explain the symbolism more clearly and give some reasons to the unifications and interpretations of the fragmental information of the "instructors." On the other hand, the "universality" of the symbolism which the similar concepts of other thinkers bring about provides the symbolism with a certain credibility.

This first aspect so far discussed is rather a primary and direct means of diminishing the clumsiness which the "instructors" causes in the text. However the second aspect, "the transition of the attitude of the protagonist

'I' toward the 'instructors' and their symbolism," seems apparently an indirect but more essential means of overcoming the presence of the "instructors."

As mentioned before, the word "instructors" indicates that they teach their symbolism to a student, Yeats as the protagonist "I." In actual fact, the teaching by the "instructors" has been completed before the text is produced. And the text functions as a re-presentation of their symbolism by the student. However, this student is not fully competent from the beginning ; the comprehension of the student grows as the text proceeds, and the attitude of the student toward his teachers and toward their instruction changes according to his growth.

In the beginning of the text, the protagonist "I" does not fully understand what the "instructors" offer to him :

DURING the first months of instruction I had the Great Wheel of the lunar phases as printed at the end of this paragraph, but knew nothing of the cones that explain it, and though I had abundant definitions and descriptions of the *Faculties* at their different stations, did not know why they passed one another at certain points, nor why two moved from left to right like the moon in the Zodiac. (80)

Here, he knows "nothing of the cones" which are the principal symbols mentioned above. Without them, he cannot understand "the Great Wheel" and the movements of the *Faculties*. Therefore, he needs to define the "cones" with the assistance of other thinkers in order to understand "the Great Wheel" and the *Faculties*. At this point, he is still incompetent regarding the instruction of the "instructors," and is not familiar with their symbolism.

Then, after explaining the principal symbol, "the Great Wheel" and the

Faculties, and schematizing the “twenty-eight incarnations,” his attitude shows a little change in “Book II : The Completed Symbol.” This section is dedicated to an explanation of the *Four Principles* and the remaining definition of the symbolism. Approaching the completion of the symbolism, he reveals self-confidence in the interpretation of the symbolism which is now quite familiar to him.

In this section, although he is in accordance with the instruction of the “instructors” symbolism, his speculation extends beyond their information by using their symbolism :

My instructors, keeping as far as possible to the phenomenal world, have spent little time upon the sphere, which can be symbolized but cannot be known, though certain chance phrases show that they have all the necessary symbols. When I try to imagine the *Four Principles* in the sphere, with some hesitation I identify the *Celestial Body* with the First Authentic Existant of Plotinus, *Spirit* with his Second Authentic Existant, . . .
(193-4)

At this point, he considers that he has already gained “all the necessary symbols” by which he can speculate on the things that the “instructors” have never mentioned. It means that he becomes confident, to a great extent, of keeping the symbolism under control. At the same time, however, as the words “with some hesitation” indicate, a little anxiety still remains : anxiety about whether he can completely handle the symbolism.

Even this remnant of anxiety disappears, and he is completely confident of manipulating the symbolism when the text proceeds into the application of the symbolism to historical events. At this stage, he rarely depends upon the “instructors.” Indeed the number of times which he mentions them and their discourses considerably decreases to the extent that they are hardly

ever found. Moreover, when the protagonist “I” refers to the symbolism, he no longer calls it “their symbolism” or “their symbols” as he does in the earlier part of the text, but calls it “my symbolism” or “my diagram” especially in “Book IV : The Great Year of the Ancients” and in “Book V : Dove or Swan.”

As in the “*Bildungsroman*” (Shroder 16), though implicitly, the text shows the growth of the protagonist “I.” The student gradually masters the discipline of the “instructors” and becomes another master of the symbolism. What is significant about this process is the fact that as the student “I” grows competent about the symbolism, the discourses of the “instructors” unwittingly diminish in both quantity and quality, and the presence of the “instructors” becomes blurred ; in consequence, it is reduced to be almost imperceptible in the text when the symbolism becomes under the control of their student.

The third aspect, that is “the transition of the status of the ‘instructors’ and their discourses,” forms an integral part of the preceding two. As the symbolism is transferred from the “instructors” to Yeats, the protagonist, the relation between the discourses of the “instructors” and the symbolism also changes because the discourses which dominate the symbolism are no longer those of the “instructors” but of the protagonist.

As the explanation of the principal symbol cited before demonstrates, in the earlier part of the text, the discourses of other people are subordinate to those of the “instructors,” and their authority as the origin of the symbolism keeps affirmed when it belongs to them. On the contrary, when the protagonist comes to control the symbolism, the discourses of other thinkers become mere examples for the verification of “his” symbolism :

..... That most philosophical of archaeologists Josef Strzygowski haunts my imagination. To him the East, as certainly to my instructors, is not India

or China, but the East that has affected European civilization, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Egypt. . . .

The East, in my symbolism, whether in the circle of the *Principles* or the *Faculties*, is always human power, whether *Will* or *Spirit*, stretched to its utmost. . . . If I translate his geographical symbolism into the language of the system [the symbolism of the protagonist] I say that South and East are human form and intellectual authority, whereas North and West are superhuman form and emotional freedom. (257-8)

At this stage, under the confident manipulation of the symbolism by the protagonist, the authority of the “instructors” is diminished to the extent that their discourses are nothing more than “voices” which are equivalent to or, at times, less significant than the discourses of other thinkers, including Strzygowski cited above.

Along the development of the text, the domination of the “instructors” over the symbolism decreases as the control of the protagonist over it becomes predominant. The protagonist replaces the “instructors” and establishes the symbolism under his control. In this way, while the “instructors” still hold the authority over the symbolism as its origin, the representation of the symbolism is accomplished by expelling the shadow of the “instructors.”

III

It is important that the symbolism which is represented in *A Vision* ultimately belongs not to the “instructors” but to Yeats himself. What the esoteric discipline of the “instructors” is really like is never revealed there. Perhaps their wisdom cannot be fully represented by language or words. It is lost and displaced forever in the text by Yeats's own symbolism. The

word “instructors” is merely a sign of what is lost, what precedes to *A Vision* but is never retained as its original form.

As Leon Surette asserts, one factor which distinguishes the occult from standard religions is its insistence on “the ineffability of genuine revelation” (Leon 15). The doctrine of the occult or of esoteric wisdom is exclusively restricted to its initiates. Only the initiated can understand the truth, the gnosis. There is no knowing whether Yeats could become one of the initiates of the “instructors” esoteric discipline. However, even if Yeats could not be fully initiated in terms of the esoteric wisdom of the “instructors,” the symbolism in *A Vision* is completed as Yeats’s own. As the examination so far exemplifies, he has constructed his own symbolism by expelling the shadow of the “instructors.” In this sense, it can be said *A Vision* shows the process of Yeats’s initiation into his own symbolism through the pursuit of the mystic discipline of the “instructors.”

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. *Yeats*. 1970. London : Oxford UP, 1972.
- Harper, George Mills. *Yeats’s Vision Papers*. 3 vols. Houndmills : Macmillan, 1992.
- Harper, George Mills, and Walter K. Hood, eds. *A Critical Edition of Yeats’s A Vision (1925)*. London : Macmillan, 1978.
- Shroder, Maurice Z. “The Novel as a Genre.” *The Theory of the Novel*. Ed. Philip Stevick. New York : Free, 1967.
- Stock, A. G. “A Vision.” *Yeats : A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. John Unterecker. N. p. : Prentice, 1963. 139-54.
- Surette, Leon. *The Birth of Modernism : Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and the Occult*. Montreal : McGill-Queen’s UP, 1993.
- Yeats, William Butler. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. 2nd ed. Houndmills : Macmillan, 1989.

———. *A Vision*. 1937. London : Macmillan, 1962.

Synopsis

A Mystic Initiation : Yeats's *A Vision*

By Ryuji Ishikawa

This essay aims to reveal that the trial of the representation of a esoteric wisdom in *A Vision* results in the construction of Yeats's own symbolism.

In *A Vision*, there exist so-called "instructors" as the origin of the symbolism which is to be reconstructed there. The unintelligible beings bring about a dilemma into the text. On the one hand, they are indispensable to the symbolism in the text in order to give it a certain authority. On the other hand, however, they inevitably cause awkwardness in the text because of their doubtful existence.

It is necessary that this dilemma should be resolved so that the text could accomplish the representation of the symbolism with some authenticity and credibility. For this purpose, some strategies are employed in the process of the text. In order to make the points clearer, they are divided into three aspects though they are interdependent of each other. They are "the reinforcement of the discourses of the 'instructors' by the discourses of other people," "the transition of the attitude of Yeats, the protagonist 'I,' toward the 'instructors' and toward their symbolism" and "the transition of the status of the 'instructors' and their discourses."

In the first aspect, it is revealed that the fragmentary information of the "instructors" is given some authenticity by employing the concepts and thoughts of other thinkers and philosophers which seems similar to those of the "instructors." The second aspects exemplifies the process in which Yeats, the protagonist "I" grows from an incompetent student of the esoteric wisdom to a confident master of its symbolism. And the last aspect shows that the dominance of the "instructors" over the symbolism is gradually decreasing according to the growth

of the protagonist.

By these strategies the presence of the “instructors” is diminished and ultimately displaced from the text though their authority as the origin of the symbolism remains undeteriorated. But what is reconstructed in the text is no longer the original symbolism of the “instructors” but Yeats’s own one. The reconstruction of the symbolism of the “instructors” has been transformed into the construction of his own. Therefore it is concluded that the pursuit of the esoteric wisdom of the “instructors” itself proves to be the initiation of Yeats into his own symbolism.